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ABSTRACT

Two studies sought to investigate two levels (high vs. low) of guilt-shame arousing appeals in the areas of adoption and needy children on expressed guilt, attitudes toward the communicator and communication, information retention, and intended and actual commitment to various behaviors. Subjects were 68 adult men and women drawn from Presbyterian Sunday schools and women's clubs. A tape recorded-slide format served as the means of presentation. The high-guilt arousing message vividly portrayed the undesirable physical, emotional, and intellectual consequences of neglection on unwanted children. The low-guilt message was similar in content and length but utilized less "emotional" language and pictures. Both messages concluded with identical recommendations. The manipulation checks on guilt arousal were significant in the predicted direction. No significant differences were obtained between conditions on information retention or attitudes toward the speaker or the communication. Generally low guilt was found to be significantly more effective in persuading subjects to comply with the recommendations of the message for intended but not actual behavior. (Author)

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THE EFFECTS OF GUILT-SHAME AROUSING COMMUNICATIONS ON ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

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Both fear and guilt-shame appeals are employed frequently in real life to influence opinion and change behavior. It is curious, however, that much research has been done on the effects of fear-arousal persuasion, but little scholarly attention has been given to the impact of guilt-shame communications.

Fear, guilt, and shame share in common a state of aversive emotional arousal. It is easier, however, to note the similarities than it is to clearly differentiate one affective state from the other (see Aronfreed, 1968). The research in the area of fear persuasion has usually focused on the aversive consequences for the subject if he does not act in accordance with the recommendations of the communication. For example, cancer is the penalty for smoking, mutilation or death the consequence of not wearing seat belts, and social rejection and bleeding gums the price for not brushing one's teeth. Thus, in this line of research, fear appears to be determined by the subject's anticipation of himself experiencing pain, disease, distress, or death.

The present study sought to distinguish guilt-shame arousal from fear arousal by focusing on the aversive consequences for others if the subject does not act in accordance with the recommendations of the communication. Thus, guilt-shame is viewed as the result of an anticipation that others, rather than oneself, will experience harm as a consequence of one's behavior. Furthermore, guilt can be theo-

retically distinguished from shame to the extent that the negative effect is a consequence of self-blame or self-criticism for one's role in another's suffering. On the other hand, shame is the degree to which emotion follows from concern about the social visibility of one's role in promoting the distress of another. In reality, however, the two states are very difficult to differentiate. The present study made no attempt to distinguish between the two, since it was not possible to have extended contact with the subjects. For the sake of brevity, hereafter only the term "guilt" will be employed.

Two studies have found that a lower level of guilt-arousing message was superior to a higher level in changing attitudes (Haefner, 1956; Zemach, 1966). In the Haefner (1956) study, subjects in the high-guilt condition were exposed to a message which vividly portrayed the past suffering of the people of Hiroshima and the present harm to Japanese fishermen resulting from America's use of nuclear weapons. The low-guilt appeal, although similar in content and recommendation to the high-guilt message, did not emphasize the harmful consequences as much. Haefner reported that the low-guilt was more effective in changing attitudes toward a test ban than the high-guilt communication. Similarly, Zemach (1966) utilized three levels of guilt-arousing appeals and found that the medium level was most effective in changing attitudes toward the civil rights movement.

The results of these studies fit the defensive-avoidance hypothesis developed by Janis (1967) to account for the studies which find low-fear superior to high-fear communications. Roughly, fear is viewed as facilitating persuasion up to a certain optimum point, after which it begins to generate resistance to persuasion because defensive reactions (denial, aggression against the communication, etc.) are employed by subjects to reduce fear instead of compliance with the recommendations of the communication. This hypothesis can be extended to guilt-arousal persuasion

as well. Haefner (1956) did, in fact, find that the subjects in the high-guilt condition were more critical of the communicator than subjects exposed to the low-guilt communication.

Based on the considerations thus reviewed, the present study was predicated on the assumption that a low-guilt appeal is more effective than a high-guilt appeal in producing compliance with the recommendations of a communication. The following hypotheses were made explicit: (a) The high-guilt message produces more negative emotional arousal than the low-guilt message. (b) The low-guilt appeal generates greater intended and actual behavior in accordance with the recommendations than the high -guilt appeal. (c) The communicator and communication receive more criticism in the high than in the low-guilt condition.

Study I

The present study was conducted in the natural setting of the respective churches of two Presbyterian women's clubs. The investigation was couched in the context of a special presentation on needy children sponsored jointly by a local college and a childrens foundation.

Subjects. The women in club I (n=17) and club II (n=24) both averaged approximately 40 years of age. Reports of family income indicated that the groups were homogenous with respect to socioeconomic level, roughly middle and upper-middle class. Each group held discussions and heard guest speakers regularly once a month. Club I was randomly assigned to the high-guilt condition, club II to the low-guilt condition.

Independent Variables

The persuasive communications. Utilizing slides and a taped-voice accompaniment, the high-guilt communication (HGC) attempted to manipulate guilt in two

ways. The first entailed interspersing throughout the communication 10 slides of extremely impoverished, malnourished, and disease stricken children from various parts of the world. The description of the conditions in which the children lived included frequent use of emotion-provoking language (e. g. ,"suffering," "dying," "tragic"). Secondly, it was directly implied that privileged Americans have played a role in this situation by not caring or helping.

The low-guilt communication (LGC) also contained 10 slides of impoverished children, but these children were, by appearance, healthy. Although the length (approximately 10 minutes) and content of the LGC and the HGC were roughly equivalent, the LGC contained less emotion-provoking adjectives. Moreover, the LGC implied only indirectly that Americans contributed to this condition. Both communications concluded with the identical recommendation that the subjects assist the childrens foundation by donating money.

Dependent Variables

Mood. Affect was measured by a semantic differential-like scale consisting of 11 bipolar adjectives (e. g. , proud-ashamed; kind-cruel; selfish-unselfish). Subjects were asked to rate how they personally felt during the presentation. Since the adjectives were separated by a seven-point scale, the possible range for scores was 11 (highest-guilt) to 77 (lowest-guilt).

Evaluations of the communicator and the communication. The speaker and the content of the communication were each rated on five bipolar adjectives (e. g. , valuable-worthless; wise-foolish). Scores had a possible range of 5 (most positive) to 35 (most negative).

Information retention. Four miltiple-choice questions served to measure the amount of the content of the communication retained. Scores had a range of zero

(none correct) to 4 (all correct).

Compliance with the recommendations. Intended behavior was assessed by asking the subjects to indicate the probability of their donating funds to help needy children. Scores ranged from 1 (zero probability) to 5 (100 per cent probability). Actual behavioral compliance was measured by distributing addressed envelopes in which the subjects could mail their pledge. The subjects were told that the donations would be coordinated by the college and forwarded to the main office of the childrens foundation. A form was also included which permitted the subjects to request additional information about needy children regardless of whether or not they decided to make a pledge.

Procedure

The experimentor introduced himself to the subjects as a volunteer who was assisting the college and the childrens foundation in their project to help needy children. After the brief introduction the communication was presented. Immediately following the presentation, the questionnaire was distributed with the explanation that it was important to the project to have the subjects' reactions to the message. After the questionnaires had been completed, the envelopes requesting the donations were then distributed. Subjects were also informed that the results of the project would be forwarded to them upon request.

Results

The mean mood score for the LGC condition ($\bar{X}$ = 45.3) was significantly different (t = 3.91, df = 39, $p < .001$) from that of the HGC condition ($\bar{X}$ = 26.4), indicating that feelings were successfully influenced in the predicted direction (lower scores, higher guilt). Contrary to prediction, attitudes toward the communicator

did not significantly differ ($t = 0.03$) between conditions. The means, however, for both the HGC condition ($\bar{X} = 30.9$) and the LGC condition ($\bar{X} = 30.8$) suggested that both communications generated rather negative evaluations of the speaker. (It will be recalled that the most negative evaluation score possible was 35.) Similarly, there was no significant difference ($t = 0.12$) between conditions with respect to attitudes toward the content of the messages. Like the evaluations of the speaker, however, attitudes toward the content of the communication were relatively negative ($\bar{X} = 27.0$ and $\bar{X} = 27.3$ for the HGC and LGC, respectively). No significant difference ($t = 0.88$) was found between conditions for information retention (HGC, $\bar{X} = 2.25$; LGC, $\bar{X} = 1.95$).

As predicted, the LGC produced greater intentions ($\bar{X} = 2.3$) than did the HGC ($\bar{X} = 1.4$) to donate money ($t = 1.76$, df 39, $p < .05$). It should be noted, however, that the scores for both groups are rather low, since the range extended to a possible 5. Finally, no envelopes from either condition were returned to donate money, request additional information about needy children, or to inquire about the results of the project. Thus, the messages selectively influenced negative affect, but the defensive-reaction hypothesis was not supported, since both groups equally devalued the speaker and the content of the communication. The compliance hypothesis was partially supported, since subjects exposed to the LGC intended to donote money significantly more than those hearing the HGC, although none of the subjects, in fact, actually did so.

Study II

The second study sought to replicate Study I by utilizing different subjects, messages, and recommendations. Men and women from two Presbyterian adult Sunday school groups served as subjects. Subjects in Sunday school I ($n=16$) and

Sunday school II (n-11) were similar as regards age and family income. The groups met each Sunday in their respective churches, in which the present study was conducted. Sunday school I was randomly assigned to the high-guilt condition, Sunday school II to the low-guilt condition.

The persuasive communications focused on homeless American children and the undesirable physical, emotional, and intellectual consequences of institutionalizing them. The messages cited various well-known sources in support of the content. Guilt was manipulated in the same manner as described in Study I; however, the messages were expanded to approximately 15 minutes and included a total of 23 slides. Identical recommendations in each communication included five suggestions for helping the situation: (a) adopt a child, (b) become a foster parent, (c) volunteer work, (d) donate money, (e) write political representatives on behalf of the children.

Measures of guilt and evaluations of the speaker and content of the communication were identical to those used in the first investigation; however, the information retention measure was expanded to six multiple-choice questions. Intended behavior was assessed on a scale which ranged from 1 (zero probability) to 5 (100 per cent probability). To assess actual behavior, forms were distributed which permitted the subjects to request information about adoption and/or the results of the project; however, unlike the first study, no money was solicited.

Results

The manipulation check on mood revealed that the HGC condition ($\bar{X}$ = 41. 3) differed significantly (t = 2. 17, df = 25, $p < .025$) from the LGC condition ($\bar{X}$ = 32. 8) in the predicted direction (higher scores, greater guilt). No significant differences were obtained between groups with respect to evaluations of the communicator,

communication, or information retention. As in Study I, however, evaluations of the speaker and content of the communication by both groups were negative, approaching the floor of the scale. As can be seen in Table 1, neither group indicated much of a desire to adopt a child, perhaps due to the fact that subjects averaged approximately 47 years of age. Subjects exposed to the LGC, however, expressed

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stronger intentions than those in the HGC to become foster parents ($t = 3.42$, $df = 25$, $p < .005$), to work in child care agencies ($t = 1.98$, $df = 25$, $p < .05$), and to donate money to child care agencies ($t = 1.85$, $df = 25$, $p < .05$). Although in the direction predicted, the difference between groups as regards intentions to write a letter was not statistically significant. As was the case in the first study, none of the subjects requested additional information.

Discussion

The findings of the present studies support the general hypothesis that a low-guilt communication is persuasively more effective than a high-guilt message. As discussed earlier, one theoretical interpretation of this relationship is that a communication which arouses negative affect also generates defensive reactions. For example, rather than accept the communication, the subject may seek to discredit or criticize the source or content of the message in an effort to reduce guilt. Although there was no significant difference between conditions on this dimension, both groups expressed rather extreme negative attitudes toward the source and content of the communication. In fact, the failure to obtain a difference between conditions may have been a function of scores approaching the floor of the scale. In any case, the data suggest that the subjects perceived both communications as unpleasant.

The fact that communications did not differ in generating critical evaluations does not necessarily mean, however, that both communications produced equal amounts of defensive reactions. Criticism of the communication is not the only defensive reaction available to deal with guilt. Other possibilities include denial of the problem or denial of responsibility for the problem. Since part of the evaluation measure included ratings of truthfulness, it is possible that the subjects were not only criticizing the communication, but questioning its veracity as well, thus denying the problem. On the other hand, the present study contained no items dealing with attribution of responsibility, so it was not possible to determine if the groups differed on this variable. It is conceivable, however, that, as affective guilt increases, so does the probability of attributing the responsibility for an offensive situation to a social object other than oneself. This would serve to direct blame elsewhere and make possible extrication from behavioral commitment.

Yet another possible means of coping with affective guilt is to derogate the individuals who are suffering. In fact, a study by Lerner and Simmons (1966) demonstrated that this reaction was more probable when subjects were led to believe that they were powerless to alter the victim's condition. Given the nature of the subject sample and the fact that children were the victims, it would be surprising if subjects in the present study used this means to reduce guilt. It is, however, possible that, as the consequences to a victim become more severe, observers of the situation feel an increased sense of powerlessness to relieve the victim's suffering. Perhaps this is partially why subjects in the high guilt more than the low-guilt condition committed themselves to less intended behavior on behalf of the children and why none, in fact, actually did so; i.e., they could have felt that any behavior on their part would matter little in such a grave situation.

The present studies have certain methodological drawbacks. These include the inopportunity to have more than one contact with the subjects, the absence of random assignment of subjects to experimental conditions, and the lack of more extensive testing. For example, more effort is needed to determine the conditions under which actual behavior follows intention to behave. Nevertheless, the findings of both studies are consistent with past reports of the effects of guilt-arousing communications. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that most research in the area of fear-arousal persuasion reveals an opposite relationship, i.e., a positive association between reported anxiety and persuasive effectiveness (Higbee, 1969). If the negative association between guilt arousal and persuasive affectiveness is influenced by defensive reactions to aversive emotional arousal, it appears likely that guilt-arousing communications may be more threatening than fear-arousing messages.

It should be noted that the messages utilized in the present studies were very similar to appeals used frequently in everyday life to solicit aid for children victimized by circumstances beyond their control. In fact, some of the slides and language used in the high-guilt presentations were taken from such sources. Moreover, some church officials interviewed judged the high-guilt messages milder than many of the messages they had actually seen on the topic. It may be that such communications could be made more effective by employing less guilt inducing content. Both the theoretical and practical aspects of guilt-arousing persuasion deserve more thought and research attention.

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TABLE 1

Mean Intended Behavior Scores

Helping behavior	Conditions	
	HGC	LGC
Adopt	1.50	1.81
Foster Parent	1.13	2.00
Volunteer Work	1.56	2.36
Donate Money	2.56	3.77
Write a Letter	2.37	3.00

Note: higher scores, greater intentions.